Love Is a Spendthrift
Luke 10:25-37
November 7, 1971
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Mark Twain once observed that he wasn't bothered by what he did not understand about the Bible. Rather, it was what he understood very clearly that bothered him most. Those are precisely my sentiments about our New Testament Lesson this morning. Anyone with an ounce of commnn sense ought not to think too deeply about the Parable of the Good Samaritan, favorite though it be. It is dangerous. It is threatening. It forces us to some reflections about ourselves that are more comfortably ignored.

Let me spell it out in very personal terms. As is the case with most ministers, I have the occasion to confront people who are the rejects of our society with some regularity. The drifters, the unemployed, the mobile alcoholics- the ones society used to call bums. They come to churches, because they know that churches are in the business of helping people. They come in broken down cars, or by foot in someone's giveaway blue serge suit, several sizes too large. They come with elaborate, well rehearsed stories of tragedy and misfortune. They stop by the church office and they want help - not advice, counseling or prayer - but five dollars, ten dollars or twenty dollars. They want it because they are hungry, borke, sick, or out of gas, or they need a drink, although that is not often said. And my method of handling the situation is to refer them to Lincoln Community Center or the Salvation Army: I am sometimes disturbed by the fact that they've interupted the business of the office: and my goal is to get them on their way as quickly as possible. I can't be bothered with them: if I took the time to get involved I might miss lunch, or the afternoon meeting. Besides, what could I do after I found out who this person really is - and really needs? So I make a referral and salve my conscience with all those neat little rationalizations we carry around in our minds for just such emergencies - among them the fact that this church gives money to Lincoln Center for this kind of situation. I get out

of it - quickly and cleanly - but always, without exception, I think of that innocuous Sunday School story about a certain man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

I understand that story all too well, and I wish I didn't. Prudent men ought to ignore the Parable of the Good Samaritan, if at all possible.

We've been thinking about love recently, that special kind of love God has for us. We began a month ago, on World Communion Sunday, and thought about the idea that God's love for us is a gift, and that it gives us our only dignity, our worth, our manhood. We proceeded to think about love in terms of God's acceptance and forgiveness, and the fact that we are O.K. in his sight. We thought about Jennifer and Oliver in "Love Story" and the profound wrongness of the suggestion that "Love means never having to say you're sorry." We thought about Mary Magdalene in the context of "Jesus Christ Superstar" and the redeeming power of love she experienced. We looked at the prodigal son and reflected on the fact that God's love for us has "No strings attached."

Implicit in all of it was the idea that God's gracious love for men, is a new reality in men's relationships with each other. The love of God, lived in Jesus Christ, has become a model for our lives. Knowing God's love; experiencing his forgivenss and acceptance of us; we dsuddenly find ourselves in a new situation - suddenly terribly free to extend that love to all those we encounter. The progression is from self to others. From personal salvation to my brother's need. Cut of the theology of God's love an ethic emerges. That is where we are this morning - thinking now about the personal implications of God's love - the personal obligation one assumes when he calls himself a disciple of Jesus Christ. So let's go back and look carefully at this dangerous little story that is really better left alone.

It started innocently enough. A lawyer came to Jesus to talk a little theology. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to receive eternal life?" Now, the man was an eccelsiastical lawyer, responsible for knowing and

interpreting the Jewish law. He knew the proper answer to his question, and Luke reveals his real motivation which was to trap Jesus in his own rhetoric. But Jesus responded by asking another question: "What do the scriptures say? How do you interpret?" The lawyer knew the book - "You must love the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, strength and mind: and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said, simply: "Correct. Do it."

But now the lawyer, who had come to set a trap, was in a trap himself. He had asked a rhetorical question. A question, the answer to which was perfectly obvious. He had come on the offensive: Jesus had put him on the defensive. Desperately he needed to save face, to demonstrate his own intellectual acumen. So he asked another question - a good Philadelphia lawyer type questinn - "But, who is my neighbor?"

The story Jesus told answers that question: it says who the neighbor is. But it does something else as well: it defines, not only who he is - but how to love him. It moves from the academic to the practical, and having heard the story we not only possess a new definition of neighbor, but also a new definition of love.

Think again about the story. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho drops 3,000 feet in twenty miles. It is still there: it is still a very trecherous road with lots of hair-pin curves and great boulders and lime stone caves in the surrounding hills. It's still a good place for an ambush - and there is still a place on that road called "Bloody Pass". If you were a highway bandit in the first century, there was no better place to practice your trade than the Jericho Road.

So a certain man discovered, who was robbed, stripped of his clothes, beaten and left to die - a Jew, a man of the Covenant People of God. Two significant men passed him by: a priest and levite, both religious officials: both, men who kept the law and felt certain of their resulting righteousness: both, I feel, very normal men in their response to the situation. How could they know that the man wasn't a decoy for a raiding party hiding in a nearby

cave. Besides, what could they do for him - all they could expect to get out of it was a bloody robe and dirty hands. They would be late for their meeting in Jericho, which someone has suggested might have been to discuss the worsening situation on this important link between the two cities. So - with good, sound reasons - they did what a lot of us would do in similar circumstances - they walked on by.

Enter - the Samaritan - despised half-breed, hated member of inferior race, unclean outcast. He stopped and bound up the wounds, and put the injured Jew on his own beast, and transported him to an inn where he personally took care of him. Next day he left money for further care, and instructed the innkeeper to do well by the man - that he, Samaritan - would be back to pay the bill. That's a bit excessive, don't you agree? That's a little impractical and extravagant and imprudent. It's one thing to help a little bit - but this - this is too much!

Let's consider the implications. First, the parable moves us from theology to ethics: from discussions of God's love - to a practical situation: from an academic inquiry into the definition of neighbor - to a certain man lying in a ditch. I think there is a certain reluctance in all of us to make that transition. There is saftey in talk: there is relative saftey in working through the idea of love: there's a whole lot of saftey in joining a group to discuss the problem of poverty. It is not so safe, however, to help a person who is, in fact, poor. Edward Huenemann, in an essay on Love and Justice, [Monday Morning, Nov. 1, 1971] observes that, "it is at the point of practicality that the Biblical understanding of love is often sacrificed. No one would be so bold as to suggest that Christians ought not to be loving but someone might question to what degree and in what way love should be more than a pious sentiment." Huenemann goes on to point out that, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, after observing the trial of love in the crucible of concentration camps, reasserted the Biblical emphasis on the concreteness and viability of human love in such acts as a cup of cold water; a visit to the prison, a word in defense

of the defenseless. . . The signs of love were always concrete and specific acts by which the life of the other was either preserved or denied."

The Parable moves us - as it did the clever lawyer - from the general to the specific, from the idea of love to the activity of loving, from the feeling of love in the heart - to the sweat and dirt at a"certain man." That's first, and once we've begun to think of love as a basic human activity, we discover that it is defined for us in very extravagant terms. We find that it is an activity that goes on outside the limits of rules and regulations and even outside the perimeter of common sense.

The Priest and Levite committed no crime in passing by. There was nothing in their law that required them to stop and render assistance. Likewise the Samaritan was not bound by a legal code to do what he did. He operated outside the law - he loved in a way that no law can ever prescribe. I think that's essential. The problems of our own society often boil down to a debate about the viability of legislating morality. In the heat of the Civil Rights controversy people often took solace in the observation that "you can't force people to love each other." That's true - even though it wasn't and isn't the point. In a society of law, people can be made to respect each other's rights. Period. But for the Christian there is an added dilemma - after equal opportunity has been extended, the Christian is clearly under the imperative to love the person, to act lovingly in ways the law cannot even prescribe.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan points out the greatest flaw in human systems of law and ethics, namely that they are devised by a group of men for application within that group, but not without. The ancient law of Israel was meant for relationships between Israelites. "Thou shalt not kill" meant "thou shalt not kill a fellow Jew" and had little to do with the Moabites. The vaunted Greek concept of Democracy was devised by and for aristrcratic men and had little to do with women and slaves, and nothing to do with Barbarians. We are terribly vulnerable here. Our own system prohibits

murder but allows My Lai and saturation bombings of Cambodian and Laotian villages. Quite by accident I happened upon a Dick Cavette rerun the other evening and heard a Lieutenant Colonel raising this very issue. He is an authentic war hero, decorated 41 times in three conflicts - and simply insisted that army regulations and American law be enforced in the treatment of Vietnamese people. After witnessing a Vietnamese mother have her throat cut while her infant was suffocated he reported the incident - and soon found himself behind a desk in Georgia and in deep trouble. We are vulnerable here - especially in a world that makes men into statistics and rate military successes in terms of body counts. For the parable insists on a common humanity - and a love extended to all men regardless of their color or political affiliations.

Last Sunday our children participated in an effort based on love as an activity which is extended to anyone in need - a beautiful activity. And once again our children were subjected to verbal abuse - as they collected for UNICEF - from people who aren't about to help a Cuban child or a Chinese child or a Yugoslavian child. We are vulnerable here, for the love Jesus was talking about is based on one premise, alone - the need of a fellow man.

Furthermore it was a personal love. The Good Samaritan didn't call an ambulance. He didn't confine his concern to lobbying for better police protection, although he should have done that too. His love was a personal activity. He bound up wounds and got his robe bloody and his hands dirty. You know, it's terribly tempting to love my fellow man at a distance - to work for better laws and a more human society and leave it go at that. But it isn't enough, according to this disturbing little story. Love that is genuine gets expressed whenever a need is confronted - and the form that love takes is dictated by the need itself.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to that kind of love. Not just in the dramatic man - lying-by-the-road situations; for, realistically, that situation may never happen to us. But we do confront hurting, bleeding people in many ways every day. We do confront lonely neighbors, and friends

whose marriage has gone suddenly sour, and acquaintences whose families are strained: we do confront each other at the point of fear about surgery next week, and concern about the loss of employment. And sometimes all that is required is to love by listening and saying "I care and I hurt with you." Sometimes love means nothing more than spending twenty minutes rather than two, with a person whose burden is too heavy to carry alone. In many ways, every day, that road-side drama is replayed in our lives: and love demands that we never walk by.

Love - the love defined by Jesus Christ is a spendthrift: when it comes into play it is extravagant and goes beyond the dictates of prudence and propriety. We've been thinking in this Parish about Stewardship - the annual necessity in order to facilitate our fiscal life for another year. We've been talking about percentages and budgets and the question, "How much shall I give." But the real issue for those who would walk in the way of our Lord is not "how much", but how do I go about giving all? How do I live my life for the sake of Jesus Christ and my fellow man who needs me? That's the real, and perhaps the only issue, in Christian Stewardship.

For we are called to lay it all on the line - to give all - to be, in everything we do - spendthrifts - for the sake of our Lord.

Jesus asked: "Which of these three seems to have been a neighbor. .?" and the lawyer answered, "The one who was kind to him." Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same."

When we do that, we love, and we are privileged to usher in a little bit of God's Kingdom on Earth.

Amen.

Father, forgive us for walking by people in need: people far away - people in our own community - but also people whose needs we know and chose to ignore. Give us grace to love without counting the cost, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.